

EPSOM & EWELL HISTORY & ARCHAEOLOGY SOCIETY



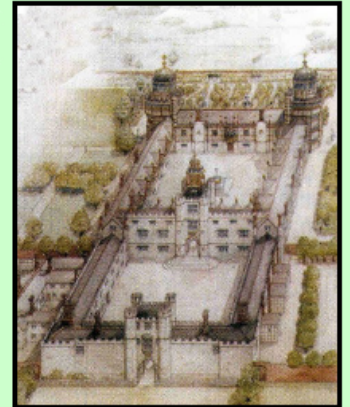
THE FIRST 50 YEARS:1960-2010

The Origins of the Society

The excavation of Henry VIII's Nonsuch Palace in 1959 is said to have been the biggest archaeological operation in a single year carried out in this country: the whole of the foundations of the building were laid bare. The organisation of the project owed much to John Dent, Epsom & Ewell Borough Librarian, and the archaeology was directed by a young Ministry of Works archaeological consultant, Martin Biddle. Although a team of professional archaeologists was in charge of the digging, the work relied heavily on volunteers with differing degrees of experience of archaeology; some 500 must have worked on the site for varying periods, the daily attendances averaging 80. Public interest was such that there were more than 60,000 visitors over a twelve week period. A makeshift museum was erected in the form of an aluminium hut that was usually used by the Council as a temporary polling station. This attracted over 26,000 people, each paying 6d and this money, together with donations and sales of John Dent's pictorial guide to the site, enabled more work and post-excavation analysis to be carried out.



The Nonsuch Antiquarian Society's logo, showing a representation of Nonsuch Palace



Contemporary illustration of Nonsuch Palace, showing the two principal courtyards



The excavation was highly successful: not only were the foundations of the palace discovered, but also the remains of Cuddington Church and a great quantity of artefacts such as remnants of the elaborate decorations of the palace and a wide range of table-ware, enabling a convincing picture of the life of Nonsuch to be built up. It was an enterprise remarkable for the excitement and enthusiasm that it generated and it is not surprising that many of the friendly team of local volunteers who had acted as diggers, guides, museum attendants and receptionists should wish to keep in contact with one another when the work was completed and the trenches refilled. Proposals were made for forming an 'Association of Nonsuch Diggers', and this came into being following a public meeting on 8th February 1960, although the name was changed to 'The Nonsuch and Ewell Antiquarian Society' (NEAS) and again, in 1972, to 'Nonsuch Antiquarian Society.'

The excavation of a burial under Cuddington Church

View across the excavated Outer Court at Nonsuch Palace, 1959



The initial aims were 'to take an active part in matters of an historical and archaeological nature mainly connected with the Ewell area but extending further afield as the opportunity occurs.' The change of name in 1972 reflected the widening of the area covered to include Epsom and other adjacent places. Martin Biddle, now Professor Biddle, who had directed the excavation so successfully, became the first president of the Society.

The further change of name in 2004 was made because it was found desirable to make clear the area covered by the Society, and because of changes in the perceived meaning of 'antiquarian', evidenced by advertisements for Zimmer frames being sent to us.

The History of Nonsuch Palace

In 1538 after 30 years on the throne and to celebrate the birth of his heir, Edward, Henry VIII began work on his splendid hunting lodge, Nonsuch Palace. The manor house, church and village of Cuddington were demolished to provide the site and building was not completed until after 1556, more than nine years after Henry's death.

The multi-storied palace was arranged around two principal courtyards. The visitor would enter from the north side, through a turret gatehouse built of brick and stone in the usual Tudor style, into the outer court. A smaller gatehouse surmounted by a clock tower on the southern side led into an inner court which was reached by a flight of eight steps. On entering the inner courtyard, the visitor was surrounded on all four sides by panels containing near life-size stucco figures of gods and goddesses moulded in high relief. The ground floor of this court was built of stone, while the upper levels, corresponding to the principal apartments on the first floor, were of timber-framing designed to hold the stucco reliefs.

The palace remained as a royal palace until the Civil War and was later repossessed by Charles II. In 1670 he gave the palace to his then mistress, Barbara Castlemaine. She, in turn, had the building demolished, starting in 1682, to save on its upkeep and to realise the value of its building materials, in order to pay off her gambling debts. The demolition process must have gone on for some time, for part of at least one of the gate houses was still standing in 1702.



Diggers on Nonsuch Palace site, 1959



Party to celebrate the completion of the 1959-1960 excavations at Nonsuch Palace



The main well, excavated 1959